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Secrecy to Surround Atlantis's First Flight

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

THE space shuttle Atlantis is to roar into space Thursday for the first time. The $1.2 billion Atlantis, the fourth and final addition to the nation's fleet of winged spaceships, will get little of the fanfare normally associated with a maiden voyage. Instead, the mission is to be wrapped in secrecy from start to finish.

The Atlantis will be carrying a classified payload for the Department of Defense. It is the second time in the history of the shuttle program that a mission has been devoted entirely to the military.

Not only the payload but also such mundane details as the exact time of launching and the duration of the flight are classified as secret. Even less public information is to be available than was the case with the first Defense Department mission in January, the Pentagon having decided to drop routine status reports. Public statements are to be made only if there is an emergency.

Despite the precautions, however, the primary purpose of the mission is an open secret.

Saying that it gleaned the information from unclassified published material, the Federation of American Scientists, in Washington, has reported that the payload is a pair of Model DSCS-III Defense Satellite Communications System satellites. According to the Federation, the DSCS III costs about $100 million and weighs a ton. It is 38 feet long when its solar panels are extended.

As a rule the Pentagon refrains from classifying communications satellites as secret, in contrast to its practice with spy satellites. The fourth Leasat satellite for Navy communications was launched in August by the space shuttle Discovery in an unclassified mission that included several civilian payloads. However, the Pentagon says that as a matter of principle it has decided to classify most shuttle flights that are devoted entirely to the military.

"The policy is based on the national security requirement of keeping information from our adversaries," said Capt. Miles Wiley of the Air Force, a Pentagon spokesman. He added that the policy would make it difficult for Soviet spy ships that regularly ply the waters off Cape Canaveral to monitor the launch or to learn the nature of any mission.

"Soviet space tracking facilites are very sparse," agreed James E. Oberg, a specialist on Soviet space programs. "They have a very difficult time tracking payloads to higher orbits unless they have advance information on where to concentrate their attention."

But critics contend that the policy of secrecy is misguided. "The Soviets know" what the payloads are, said John E. Pike, head of space policy at the Federation of American Scientists. "It's only the American public that's being kept in the dark."

Mr. Pike's work lends credence to the notion that devoted individuals, Soviet or American, can often penetrate Government secrecy by simply paying close attention to the public record. Concerning the Atlantis mission, for instance, Mr. Pike quoted an August 1981 fact sheet from the Air Force's Space Division as saying that the "first launch of a DSCS III on the Shuttle is scheduled for mid-1985." Mr. Pike went on to cite seven additional pieces of evidence for the nature of the payload.

"By attempting to limit very basic types of information," Mr. Pike said, "the Pentagon reduces the public's ability to understand what we're doing in space and avoids the responsibility of having to answer any questions about it."

Pentagon officials disagree, saying that there are many secrets that can and should be kept from the Soviet Union for reasons of national security. Captain Wiley said an example was the date of the recent test of an American antisatellite weapon. The press disclosed several days in advance that the test would be Friday, Aug. 13. He said that leak probably helped the Soviet Union monitor the performance of the weapon as it slammed into a target in space.

As for the Atlantis mission, Captain Wiley said he could not "confirm or deny" what is to be in the shuttle's payload bay.

According to a brochure put out by the General Electric Company's Space Systems Division, which makes DSCS III, one of the satellite's key features is its "hardening" to "assure survivability" against enemy attacks by means of nuclear bombs and other weapons. Another feature is that it has a "single channel transponder" to send emergency action messages from the President to the nation's nuclear forces.

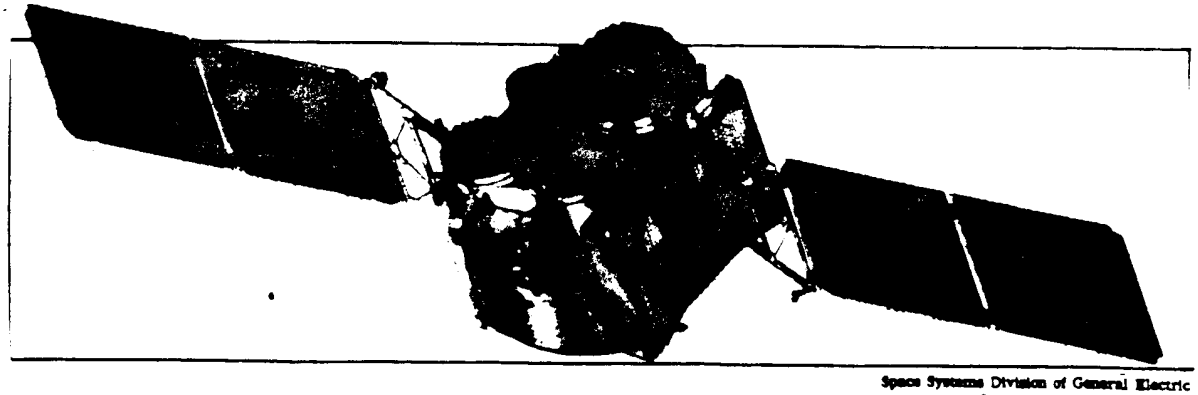
William A. Shumann, a G.E. spokesman in Washington, said the brochure had been prepared and published in the late 1970's, and that such information probably would be kept secret if the Reagan Administration had its way. "We no longer give the specifications on this satellite," he said. "The Air Force has tightened up considerably."

The Pentagon has said that the Atlantis, its five-man crew and its cargo would be launched sometime between 10:20 A.M. and 1:20 P.M. Thursday. The precise time is to be disclosed nine minutes before the planned liftoff.

Reporters were denied the interviews and news conferences with shuttle crew members that normally precede launches, and they will not be able to monitor space-to-ground communications during the flight.

During the secret shuttle mission in January, the Air Force issued a statement every eight hours that said everything on board the shuttle was going well. Except for a brief statement after liftoff, those status reports are to be dropped this time around. The landing of Atlantis is to be announced 24 hours in advance.

All crew members on the maiden voyage of the Atlantis, the 21st flight of a space shuttle, are members of the military. The commander is Col. Karol Bobko of the Air Force. The others are Lieut. Col. Ronald J. Grabe of the Air Force, Maj. David C. Hilmers of the Marine Corps, Lieut. Col. Robert C. Stewart of the Army, and Maj. William A. Pailes of the Air Force.



Space Systems Division of General Electric

Communications satellite of the Defense Department, reported to be secret shuttle payload, is 38 feet long.